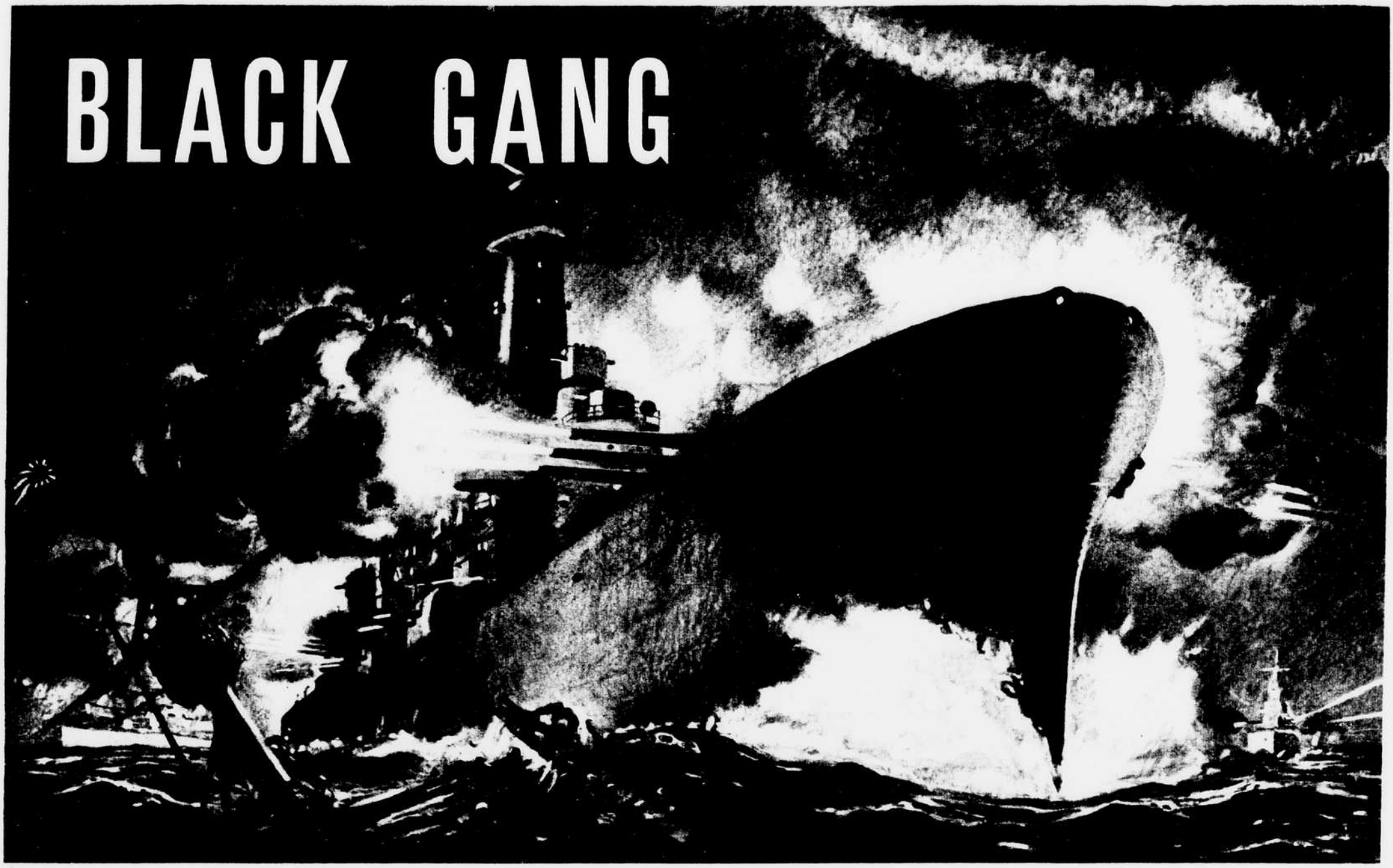
BLACK GANG



They're the engine-room crew — the men who keep a warship in the fight. Hold tight! We're going into battle, below decks, with a chief engineer

by Lt. Comdr. Henry M. Marshall, U.S.N.

with Don Eddy

THE new American battleship was a few days out of port, bound for the South Pacific and her first encounter with the enemy. I was chief engineer on her, and it was only by accident that I overheard this youngster unburdening himself to the veteran machinist's mate.

The young bucko had envisioned himself fighting the war with a machine gun in one hand and the Stars and Stripes in the other, every inch a hero. Instead, he found himself assigned to the engine rooms, five decks below the nearest shooting iron.

He kept saying, "I don't get it. Those guys up topside do all the fighting. We stand around down here like a bunch of dummies, watching a lot of cockeyed gauges. It don't make sense."

I saw the chief's neck get red, for it isn't healthy to tell an engineer his work is not important. But he controlled himself with an effort, tapped the newcomer's chest with a horny forefinger and said firmly:

"Get this, boot, and get it straight. There wouldn't be any fightin' up topside if it wasn't for us down here. We keep this scow runnin', see? We keep it floatin' and we keep it fightin'. Why, bud," he said with scornful pride, "we're the *heart* of this wagon!"

Perhaps that was an excess of enthusiasm. And perhaps not.

Nothing More Vital

I MUST confess that I felt much like the bewildered youngster when I was first assigned to engineering in 1931, for when I left Annapolis I had expected to be in gunnery. But now, after two battles, I know that no post on a man-o'-war is more important than the engine room.

New acquaintances nearly always ask me, "But isn't it frightening, shut down there in the bottom of the ship, unable to see what's going on?"

No, I tell them, it isn't frightening. Exciting, yes. You feel that you're part of a team, a key man doing a vital job. You're keen to do the best you can, so you have no time to be frightened. Perhaps I can make it clear by telling you what my department did to help sink one Japanese battleship, three cruisers, another cruiser or large destroyer, and shoot down 32 enemy planes.

We were part of a task force operating in the South Seas last fall when, one afternoon, word was flashed that a strong Jap fleet had been located. Our vessel was one of the newest and largest afloat. All of us aboard, from the rawest boot to the "Old Man" himself, were eager to test her power.

I have 450 men in the engineering department. During the next two nights and three days, while we steamed steadily toward the enemy, the atmosphere below decks was electric with excitement. Although our mechanical equipment was in tip-top condition, men went around trying to find things out of order, to make jobs for themselves. On the third night, word was passed through the loudspeakers that battle might be joined next day.

Before I went to my cabin that night, we had gone over the final orders until every man understood them. About half my force goes to the gunnery department during battle. Those who remain below with me are the most seasoned men I have.

Heavy Odds

GENERAL Quarters sounded over the loudspeakers an hour before sunrise. I went immediately to the control engine room deep in the ship. The control room is long and narrow, with one bulkhead taken up by dials and gauges. These instruments tell the entire mechanical story of the ship.

After getting reports from the men on watch, I reported to the bridge and, at sunrise, went to breakfast. I learned then that the Japanese force was greatly superior to ours — three or four times as many aircraft carriers, for one thing.

About nine o'clock I was in the wardroom having a cup of coffee when the general alarm was sounded and the order, "Man your battle stations!" blared. This was it! I gulped my coffee and headed below.

Behind me, as I hurried down the ladders from deck to deck, I heard the watertight doors clanging shut and knew that men were dogging them tight. We in the engine rooms are isolated during battle; four or five decks above us are hermetically sealed. I pulled the last door shut, dropped into the control room, pulled on the old carpet slippers I wear because they're comfortable and because they're good luck — and took my post before the master board. The engineer officer of the watch, Lieut. A. R. (Tony) Schubert, took his post near by and my two "talkers," with their telephone sets strapped on, took places at my sides. We were ready for business.

Almost at once the loudspeaker went into action as the ship's supply officer, topside, began a running account of what was happening. This is one of his jobs. He has to be a combination official observer and ringside broadcaster, keeping the ship's personnel informed of the action. He said now:

"Attention. Planes have been reported sixty miles away and coming fast." He meant Jap planes, and he continued to report their progress as their positions were relayed to the ship — 45 miles away, then 30, then 15. Suddenly he cried, "Here they come!"